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ABSTRACT

A study examined the attention getting value of nonsensical and sexual humor used in liquor advertisements to determine if one was more effective than the other in attracting male magazine readers. Thirty-two Starch-scored liquor ads taken from 1976 and 1977 issues of "Time," "Newsweek," and "Sports Illustrated" were analyzed by three male readers. Starch is a syndicated research service that measures readership through the use of an aided-recall technique to establish the amount of attention given to a particular ad. The readership scores for each ad generally represent interviews with one hundred or more readers whose demographic characteristics match those of the audience of the magazine in which the ad originally appeared. The subjects were individually instructed to study each ad carefully and, based on an "overall impression" decision rule, to identify it as employing either nonsensical or sexual humor (according to definitions of the terms developed from research literature). Although no readership differences were found for male readers who remembered seeing or reading some part of the liquor ads, a significant difference was found for male readers who remembered reading more than half of the ads' copy. The findings suggest that ads employing nonsensical humor are potentially more effective in attracting male readers to "read on" than are ads employing sexual humor. (FL)

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MALE READERSHIP DIFFERENCES IN LIQUOR MAGAZINE ADS EMPLOYING NONSENSICAL AND SEXUAL HUMOR

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Abstract

MALE READERSHIP DIFFERENCES IN LIQUOR MAGAZINE

ADS EMPLOYING NONSENSICAL AND SEXUAL HUMOR

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This study examines male readership differences in liquor magazines ads employing nonsensical and sexual humor. Starch scored ads were analyzed to determine how much attention male readers allocated to ads employing the two types of appeals. The analysis of the data indicates that male readers tend to allocate more attention engagement to liquor ads employing nonsensical humor appeals.

MALE READERSHIP DIFFERENCES IN LIQUOR MAGAZINE ADS EMPLOYING NONSENSICAL AND SEXUAL HUMOR

There is considerable controversy as to whether humorous appeals enhance or reduce the effectiveness of advertising.[1] Those who support humor in advertising argue that such appeals reduce resistance to persuasion attempts and quote research which indicates that humor results in better recall than non-humor and above average brand preference changes.[2] Those who argue against humor in advertising contend that such appeals reduce advertising effectiveness because they become repetitious and tiresome.[3] However, both groups agree that humor is one of the most important discriminating dimensions among advertising appeals and that is an often used strategy among practitioners.[4] There is also agreement that humor is a neglected area of research.[5]

From a managerial perspective it has generally been concluded that humorous appeals have the ability to attract more attention to an advertisement.[6] This study examines the attention getting value of two different types of humor in order to determine if one is more effective than another within a specific class of products. Although a few studies have examined male and female differences in response to hostile or aggressive humor in advertising (i.e., intent to ridicule)[6], no study has examined readership differences in response to nonsensical and sexual humor in advertising. The need for the inquiry is particularly impor-

tant because there is reason to believe that readership differences exist between ads employing the two types of appeals. Research has shown that men enjoy sexual humor more than nonsensical humor[7] and it is generally accepted by advertising practitioners that humor is an important device for gaining the reader's attention.[8]

Starch scored magazine ads were used to test for readership differences. Starch is a widely recognized syndicated research service which measures ad readership.[9] The service uses an aided-recall technique to establish the amount of attention that readers remember giving to a particular ad. The readership scores for each ad generally represent interviews with one hundred or more readers whose demographic characteristics match those of the magazine's audience in which the ad originally appeared. Although the readership scores tell nothing about whether a magazine ad has any effect on higher-order stages of information processing, readership is an accepted measure of the attention-getting value of an ad and research has established that attention is a necessary condition for learning, attitudinal, and behavioral effects.[10]

METHOD

The sample consisted of thirty-two liquor ads taken from Starch scored 1976 and 1977 issues of Time, Newsweek, and Sports Illustrated. Liquor was selected as the product class for a number of reasons.

An initial investigation of ads across various product categories found liquor advertising to have a higher proportion of nonsensical and sexual humor than ads for other products. Additionally, there has been a great deal of recent interest in liquor advertising by government agencies.. Prompted largely by increases in alcohol consumption, the agencies have funded a number of studies to investigate the effect of liquor advertising. General results indicate that volume of advertising is not a major factor in alcohol consumption. It was felt this study would provide useful information in this area by focusing

on how different types of humor effect attention value, the first stage in consumer information processing.[11]

Restricting the sample to liquor ads also controlled for inherent interest differences across product categories. The ads were selected from the same issues of all three magazines to control for seasonal factors which might affect readership. To control for other potential confounding factors, only full-page four color ads were included in the sample and the data analysis was confined to male-only readership scores. Although the controls limited the number of ads analyzed to thirty-two, they enhanced the validity of the results.

The thirty-two ads were evaluated by a panel of three male liquor drinkers, who all subscribe to Sports Illustrated and either Time or Newsweek. Liquor drinkers were selected to evaluate the type of appeal employed in each ad because they are highly involved with the product type and liquor ads are directed toward them as subscribers to the magazines. Each panel member was instructed to carefully study each ad and, based on an "overall impression" decision rule, to identify it as employing either nonsensical or sexual humor. The following definitions were developed from the research literature[12] and used by the panel to evaluate the ads:

1) Nonsensical humor associates liquor with a humorous, but incompatible situation. For instance, an ad employing this appeal might depict an empty container sitting on a table with the headline and body copy stating "The Butler Did It" or the liquor displayed alone with the headline and body copy talking about "Putting Money In The Mattress."
2) Sexual humor associates liquor with sexual stimulation or activities. For instance, an ad employing this appeal might depict a man and woman in a humorous, but sexually suggestive situation. An example of such a situation would be a scantly clothed couple embracing after spraying paint on each other.

The panel members were allowed to evaluate at their own pace and to review the ads as many times as they desired before making a final determination. An ad was included in the data analysis only when all three members agreed about the type of humor employed.

The t-test for difference between two independent samples was performed to compare the differences between readership scores for ads identified as employing nonsensical or sexual humor. Included in the analysis were the three major Starch scores: 1) "noted" (the percent of readers who saw the ad); 2) "seen/associated" (the percent of readers who read any part of the ad); and 3) "read most" (the percent of readers who read more than half of the ad's copy).[13]

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the mean readership scores and the range of scores for ads employing nonsensical and sexual humor. Table 2 indicates that the mean

Table 1 about here

"noted" score for ads employing sexual humor was marginally (i.e., sixteen one-hundredth of a percentage point) greater than the mean "noted" score for the

Table 2 about here

nonsensical humor ads. For the mean "seen/associated" scores, the nonsensical humor ads scored higher than the sexual humor ads. The greatest magnitude of difference in readership was found for the mean "read most" scores. The nonsensical humor ads scored over nine percentage points higher than the sexual humor ads.

T-tests of differences between the readership scores for the two groups support the results presented above. As indicated in Table 2, the differences for the "noted" and "seen/associated" scores were not statistically significant. The nonsensical humor ads had significantly higher average "read most" scores than the sexual humor ads.

DISCUSSION

Although no readership differences were found formale readers who remembered seeing (i.e., "noted" scores) or reading some part (i.e., "seen/associated" score) of the liquor ads, a significant difference was found for male readers who remembered reading more than half of the ads' copy (i.e., "read most" score). This suggests that ads employing nonsensical humor are potentially more effective in attracting male readers to "read on" than ads employing sexual humor. An obvious strategic implication would be to use nonsensical humor when requiring the reader to spend more time with a given liquor advertisement. However, we must caution that the Starch test only measures the amount of information read, not attitude change or communication penetration.

Because the Starch method moves from a "gross" attention measure to higher order measures of attention engagement and cognitive activity, this phenomena might be explained by inherent differences in the two types of humor. A simple noting of sexual humor probably gives the reader a more complete notion of the outcome of a sexual situation or activity portrayed in an ad than nonsensical humor. Because nonsensical humor is situationally incompatible by definition, it has more curiosity value than sexual humor. As a result, it stands to reason that male readers might read more than half of an ad's copy just to find out what is going on in the ad.[14]

FOOTNOTES

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TABLE 1

Comparison of Readership Scores For
Ads Employing Nonsensical and Sexual Humor

	Number Using	Noted			Seen/Associated			Read Most		
		Mean Score	Range		Mean Score	Range		Mean Score	Range	
			Minimum	Maximum		Minimum	Maximum		Minimum	Maximum
Sexual Humor	13	42.85	27	56	32.92	19	44	6.69	2	17
Nonsensical Humor	19	42.32	26	59	37.32	18	58	16.05	2	32

TABLE 2

T-test: Differences Between Readership Scores For Ads Employing Nonsensical and Sexual Humor

	Mean Scores			
	Sexual Humor	Nonsensical Humor	Difference Between Means	t
"Noted"	42.85	42.32	+ .16	+ .05
"Seen/Associated"	32.92	37.32	-4.4	-1.36
"Read Most"	6.69	16.05	-9.36	-3.27*

*Two-tailed test, df = 30, $p < .01$